

“Freedom from the Flesh”

GALATIANS 5:13-21

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This past Monday, most of us took some time to remember the men and women who gave their lives for our freedom. We live in a land of freedom, and along with that freedom comes great responsibility. On a daily basis, we are faced with many decisions. The choices we make not only affect ourselves, but our choices also affect the lives of others.

We could say the same thing about the freedom that we as Christians have in Christ. A great price was paid for our freedom from sin, but with that freedom also comes great responsibility. The choices we make affect not only ourselves but others as well. And so, as we live the Christian life, we are faced with many decisions - how we interact with other people, where we go, what we do, and how we behave. With this in mind, I would like for us to start a two-part series of lessons on the freedom we have in Christ, and I would like for us to focus our studies on a paragraph at the end of Galatians 5 (p. 1825). Several weeks ago, a young man from Illinois was working on some kind of a Bible class lesson and sent me a message looking for advice. He was asking about the fruit of the Spirit, and as I started looking into it, I started to realize that we have never looked at this passage in sermon form. So, I would like to correct that, starting this morning with the works of the flesh, and concluding next Sunday morning with the fruit of the Spirit.

In today's passage, we are about to find that Paul writes about the ***“flesh.”*** And even before we read the text, I would point out that the word ***“flesh”*** is used quite a number of times in the Bible, and sometimes the word is used in different ways. This morning, though, we are not talking about ***“flesh”*** in terms of our physical bodies; instead, we are talking about a worldly way of thinking. We are talking about what normally happens when we as human beings make decisions on our own without any input or influence from God. In Galatians 5, the ***“flesh,”*** then, is the part of us that gives in to sin, the part of us that opens the door for sin. One author has described the ***“flesh”*** as the ***“I”*** that tries to satisfy with anything other than God. I believe it was Augustine who explained that we as humans are born with a God-shaped hole in our hearts. In other words, there is a part of us that only God can satisfy. The ***“flesh,”*** then, is our attempt to fill that hole with something other than God. The ***“flesh,”*** then, is the part of us that gives sin a chance.

So, with this in mind, as we think about our freedom, and as we think about the decisions that all of us make on a daily basis, let us please look together at Galatians 5:13-21,

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. ¹⁹ Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

As we look at this passage, it might be easy for us to focus in on that list of sins there at the end, and we will look at the list in just a moment, but I would like for us to focus instead on the freedom we have to make choices concerning the way we live.

- I. **And as we think about these choices, I want us to notice here at the beginning that we as Christians are facing A CONSTANT STRUGGLE (verses 13-18).**

We don't have time to get into everything in verses 13-18, but as we back up and look at that little section, one thing is clear, and that is: The flesh and the Spirit are locked in a fight to the death. The flesh wants us to do things the easy way, the flesh wants us to do whatever we need to do to feel good in the moment, but the Spirit wants us to do things God's way, the Spirit wants us to do what is right. And I would point out here: We are not talking about two groups of people – we are not talking about spiritual people over here and fleshly people over here. Sometimes people might get the idea that Christians are basically good people and that we are opposed to people in the world – spiritual people versus fleshly people. But that is not the picture Paul is painting here. The picture in verses 13-18 is that Christians struggle with sin, and it is a constant battle. On the inside, there is an ongoing war between the flesh and the Spirit. As Paul says in verse 17, ***“For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”*** In other words, even as Christians, there are constantly things that we really want to do that we have to struggle not to do.

We have an example of this in verses 14-15. As we live in freedom, as we make choices on a daily basis, we can love each other or we can bite and devour each other. And even as Christians, it can be a real struggle sometimes not to bite and devour a fellow Christian. There are times when we really want to lash out. There are a lot of things that the fleshly part of us would love to say, but the spiritual part of us has to struggle to keep that impulse under control.

So, if you are on the outside of the church looking in, it might seem to you that we are a pretty righteous group of people, that Christians have pretty much everything squared away spiritually, but that is not the case. We might make it through a worship assembly without biting somebody's head off, but even then sometimes, there is a very real but unseen struggle going on in the inside. Most of us have heard about the man who went to God in prayer, “So far today, Lord, I have done alright. I haven't gossiped. I haven't lost my temper. I haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent. I'm very thankful for that. But in a few moments, Lord, I'm going to get out of bed. And from then on, I'm going to need a lot of help.” Most of us

could say “Amen” to that prayer. We know what that man was talking about. The Christian life is a real struggle.

And of course, if we get tired or fed up and just give up on the struggle, that’s where we get into real trouble. In reality, though, there are some sinful thoughts and actions that we need to always be fighting. The temptation is to feel the urge to do something and to just go along with it. In the opening verse, though, Paul tells us that we are not to turn our freedom into an opportunity for the flesh. There is a constant struggle involved and we need to maintain that resistance. We can grow, we can make progress, we have the Lord’s help and we have the help of our Christian family, but that tension between the flesh and the Spirit will be with us for as long as we live. So, we have learned (first of all), that there is a struggle going on and we are not to give up on it.

- II. **Thankfully, though, Paul does not just leave it at that; but instead, he goes on to give us a list, a list of some attitudes and actions that we need to be aware of – he gives us some danger signs, a list that he labels as “DEEDS OF THE FLESH.” In other words, if we find ourselves doing these things, we need to watch out, we need to change, we need to make some adjustments – we need to turn back onto the right path.**

And again, we are thankful that Paul is so clear. One of the difficulties in the War on Terror is that it’s hard to know who the enemy is. We don’t have two armies facing each other on the battlefield, so to make any progress, one of the hardest things to do is to figure out who we are actually fighting. And that’s what Paul does here – he identifies the *“deeds of the flesh.”* And we will go through the list, but as we study, I really hope that we will allow the word of God to work in our hearts. There is a danger on two sides here. On one hand, the point is not that we look at this list and give up because we find ourselves here, the point is not that we conclude that we are bad and that there is no hope for us, but the point of this list is that we see ourselves in need of help. So, there is a danger that we may get overwhelmed and give up, but the point is that we maintain the struggle.

On the other hand, the danger on the other extreme is that we don’t see ourselves here at all, that we maybe just see other people in this list, “Hey, that guy sitting over there really needs to be listening to this lesson.” And that’s not good either. Hopefully, as we look at these words we are not committing these sins right now – after all, we are sitting in church with Bibles in our hands – but the danger on this end is that we see what other people are doing but do not see what we may be doing.

So, as we get into it, please notice how Paul says that, *“the deeds of the flesh are evident.”* The deeds of the flesh are obvious. So, this is what we need to be on the lookout for – this is what we struggle against. These are the warning signs.

1. **First of all, we have “sexual immorality.”**

The word is *“PORNEIA,”* and as you can hear, it is the basis for our English word “pornography.” “Porn” is the sexual part of it, and “graphy” is the image part of it. PORNEIA refers to all kinds of sexual sin – sexual intimacy outside of marriage, any kind of unlawful sexual conduct – homosexuality, bestiality, cheating on your spouse, moving in together before you’re married – all of these things would fall under the umbrella of PORNEIA. Of course, today, we hear about alternative lifestyles, and cohabitation, and fooling around, or friends with benefits – all of these are merely euphemisms (ways of making sin sound less bad than it really is). PORNEIA (sexual sin) is the first warning sign to look out for.

2. The second work of the flesh is related to the first and is labeled by Paul as “impurity.”

Most of us are familiar with the word “catharsis.” Catharsis is the idea of purging something from our lives so that we are pure. Maybe we see a therapist, and we might say that it was a “cathartic experience,” because we were able to get something off our chest. Well, the word Paul uses here is basically CATHARSIS with an “a” in front of it, which makes it negative, so we are talking here about any thing that is not pure. In the medical world in ancient times, this word was sometimes used to refer to a wound that was infected and full of puss. If we find ourselves constantly giving in to impure thoughts, Paul is telling us not to give in but to keep up the struggle.

3. The third work of the flesh is “sensuality.”

Some older translations might refer to “*licentiousness*.” And yes, that is a rather old-fashioned word, and we might think that nobody uses that word or even knows what that word means anymore. However, several years ago I was cleaning out the spam filter on the church’s email account, and I noticed a message that got snagged. The message was from a Melinda somewhere in Romania, and the message had the subject line, “Be really licentious tonight.” I did not open the message, but I printed the subject line and filed it under Galatians 5, knowing that someday I would preach on this passage. So, this is proof that somebody out there knows what this word means!

Scholars translate the word as “unbridled lust, wantonness, shamelessness, filthy words, indecent bodily movements, unchaste handling of males and females.” William Barclay says that the word refers to somebody who is so far gone in lust and desire that he or she no longer cares what other people say or think. Think about a boy and a girl who are so into each other at a party – they are going at it, and they don’t care what anybody else might think about that. Josephus, the Jewish historian, once used the word to refer to a man who indecently exposed himself to a crowd. I think of a lot of what goes on downtown, especially overnight, including much of what passes as dancing – the inappropriate handling of males and females, the posting of all but naked pictures on social media. Go online – even among Christian friends – and we see swimwear and prom dresses that would be more appropriate in the bedroom between a husband and wife than to be worn in public places. As I was thinking about the lesson early this morning, it hit me: The socks I am wearing right now have more square footage than much of the clothing that we see people wearing online. Some will say, “That’s none of your business! I’m pure! If somebody has a problem with what I’m wearing, well, if they lust, that is their problem.” But no! Remember the definition of the word, “someone who has gone so far into lust and desire that they no longer care what other people say or think.” We are to look into God’s word as we would look into a mirror, and we are to open our hearts. If we have given in, if we have given up on the struggle, Paul is reminding us here to reengage, to push back.

4. The next work of the flesh is “idolatry” (verse 20).

Idolatry refers to the worship of idols. And yes, this includes bowing down to a little wooden statue, but it also includes what happens when we put anything before God – pleasure, work, money, college, stuff, hobbies, food, movie stars, musicians, toys, and even our friends and families. Remember what the Lord said: Anyone not willing to turn his back on his own parents is not worthy to be called a disciple. All of these things can be put on a pedestal and worshiped. God absolutely has to be in first place, and if He is not in first place, then we need to struggle to put Him back where He belongs. Fight the urge to put God in second place.

5. **We also see a warning here against “sorcery.”**

The Greek word is PHARMAKEIA, and I think you can see the similarity to the English word “pharmacy.” As I understand it, the word literally refers to the use of drugs. In the ancient world, people would use mind-altering drugs in an attempt to get in touch with the spirit world. They would basically get high as a way of seeing stuff in the spirit world that they normally couldn’t see – the idea of a magic potion. And so, over time, the word came to be translated as “*sorcery*.” We could put Ouija boards in this category, along with tarot cards, and séances, and even astrology, the checking of horoscopes. When we do these things we are looking for some kind of spiritual direction outside the word of God, and that is the warning that Paul gives to us here. Whether it is the taking of drugs or some other practice, these things should be a red flag to us.

6. **We now get into an extended section dealing with how we interact with others, and the first item in this category is “enmities.”**

Paul is talking about having bitterness or animosity toward someone. Enmity is expressed in dark, ugly feelings of contempt or loathing for another person – hatred, even if we forgot why we were so mad at that person in the first place! Today we might refer to having “hard feelings” against someone. Hard feelings are listed here as a warning sign that something is wrong, that we are headed in the wrong direction.

7. **The next work of the flesh is “strife.”**

We have the idea of conflict, the idea of being against something or someone just for the sake of being contrary. In Greek, the word is ERIS, and there is a Greek goddess by the same name. She is known as the goddess of chaos, strife, and discord. Her Roman counterpart is the goddess Discordia, and I think you can see what she is about just by her name – the idea of discord. Strife is the state of being incompatible or opposite, difficult to work with, disagreeable, contrary, or contentious. Strife is a work of the flesh that is to be struggled against.

8. **The next work of the flesh is “jealousy.”**

Jealousy is the feeling of resentment we have when we really want what somebody else has. It is the idea of zeal, but it is zeal misdirected. The root of the word goes back to the idea of something that is boiling. So, if we find ourselves boiling up on the inside over the fact that somebody has something that we don’t, Paul is telling us to fight it. Push it back.

9. **Paul goes on to point out the danger in “outbursts of anger.”**

We think of an outburst or an outbreak and it almost sounds like a disease – something terrible has been unleashed, and that is the idea here, a catastrophic eruption of anger. Some translations might refer to fits of rage or fits of temper, a temper tantrum. This word was used in the ancient world to refer to a fast-moving forest fire or the eruption of a volcano. We might think of the tornadoes we’ve seen over the past few weeks – fast and violent. Anger can be like that, so “Watch out!” Paul says.

10. **Paul continues (in the middle of verse 20) with “disputes.”**

The word comes from a root word referring to a “day laborer.” And we think that’s strange, but it carries the idea of “selfish ambition,” the idea of a mercenary or somebody doing something out of selfish motives, the

idea of selfish aggression at the expense of another person. In the ancient world, this word was used to refer to politicians who wanted political office not to serve the greater good, but rather, for their own selfish motives. Selfish ambition, then, is something we are told to struggle against.

11. Paul then refers to “dissensions.”

The word literally refers to “standing apart.” And so we have the idea of the church over here, but then there are some other people over here “standing apart,” a small group of people who have joined together to get their own way, a group focused on tearing apart instead of being focused on bringing something together. This is a reference to those who are not supportive of the group as a whole, rebellious, divisive, discontent, willing to break up friends.

12. At the end of verse 20, we have a reference to “factions.”

The word goes back to the same root as heresy or heretic, and the word literally refers to making a choice. The idea is: Some people instead of taking a stand on God’s word will take a stand on a matter of opinion, and they will make that their choice, they will make that their “big deal,” this is the hill they choose to die on. And then, because they have made this choice, they will choose to take their own separate path, and a division has then taken place.

13. At the beginning of verse 21, Paul refers to “envying.”

Envy, of course, is closely related to jealousy. It is the burning desire to have what somebody else has.

14. We then come to a reference to “drunkenness.”

We would love it if the Bible just came out and said, “Drunkenness is hereby defined as .08,” but it does not. Drunkenness is the excessive use of wine or other forms of strong drink. It is the idea of being intoxicated. Of course, in Ephesians 5:18, the Bible says, **“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,”** we are filled with the spirit by singing, **“...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.”** In 1 Peter 4:3, Peter warns us about **“drinking parties.”** In other words, not only is it a sin to get drunk, but we are not to spend our time hanging out in places where people do a lot of drinking. It is a sin to attend a **“drinking party.”**

15. The final word is “carousing.”

My understanding is that this word is used three times in the New Testament, and each time it is used alongside a reference to the abuse of alcohol. Literally, it is the idea of a village festival. One translation refers to **“wild parties.”** I want to read the use of this word from one scholar in the Greek language. This is what he said, “a nocturnal and riotous procession of half drunken and frolicsome fellows who after supper parade through the streets with torches and music...and sing and play before houses of male and female friends; hence used generally of feasts and drinking parties that are protracted till late at night and indulge in revelry.” As a culture, we think we are so special – nobody has ever done what we’ve done – but I have just read a 2,000-year-old description of Freakfest, the Mifflin Street Block Party, and a description of Breese Terrace on game day! If we as Christians participate in that kind of thing, it should be warning that we are participating in the works of the flesh.

16. **“Carousing” is the last word, but notice: Paul does not end there – he goes on and refers to “things like these.”**

And with that, we get the feeling that this is not a complete list! Paul could have gone on and on and on, but the picture just with these 15 things is incredibly clear, “*...those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*”

Conclusion:

As we close, I would make several observations based on what we’ve studied.

1. First of all, God offers salvation to anyone who is willing to struggle with sin. If we give up and give in on these things, salvation is not possible. But for those who are willing to put up a fight, salvation is available. So that’s number one: If you’re willing to struggle with these things, don’t give up.
2. Secondly, I would observe that there is no distinction here between these sins. We have just studied a list of 15 deeds of the flesh, and I would point out that there was no hierarchy here. We see no arrangement from worst sin to best sin. And that tells me: As we live and grow together as a Christian family, there is no room for pride. We have no right to look down on somebody else because they’re struggling with a sin that I am not struggling with. I think of the difference between Coke and Pepsi. You know I’m a Coke fan, and I know that some of you like Pepsi, but when you actually sit down with a bottle of each, you find that the ingredients are just about identical – water, sugar, caramel color, caffeine, and so on – even the calories are basically the same. There might be a slight difference in flavor, but the two are basically the same. The same goes for sin. Any sin has the ability to separate us from God. So, there is no room look down on others because their sins are different from ours.
3. A third observation: There is no dishonor in confessing sin – first to God, but also to our brothers and sisters in Christ. If I’m sick and I go out for a nice dinner, I will do everything I can to cover up my symptoms. I will try not to cough and sneeze all over the restaurant. But when I go to the doctor, I’m going to let it fly! I plan on giving a full accounting of all of my aches and pains. In the same way, there is a tremendous value to confessing our sins and struggles not only to God but also to our Christian family.
4. And one final observation: We end where we started this morning, and that is: Life is a series of choices. We can choose to love each other in the church, or we can choose to bite and devour each other. Husbands can choose to love their wives or not. Wives can choose to lovingly submit to their husbands or not. We can choose to give in to the flesh, or we can choose to put up a fight and struggle against it. As we live, then, we need to ask: Will this choice bring me closer to God and his will for my life, or will this choice pull me deeper into the world?

Lord willing, I’d like for us to continue next week by looking at the next paragraph, the positive side of all of this, and I’d like for us to look at what it means to grow in God’s Spirit. There is a lot of hope in the next paragraph, and I would invite you to read ahead and to join us again next Sunday.

The Bible teaches that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. He died in our place. We respond to that sacrifice with faithful obedience. We struggle against sin – we sometimes refer to this as repentance. And then, we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism so that our sins will be forgiven. If you have any questions, let us know. If you are struggling and we can pray about something in your life right now, let us know. If you

have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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